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ABSTRACT

This survey summarizes the experience of nine growing British companies which have introduced effective face-to-face communication by using a system of briefing groups. A briefing group is one which is called together regularly in order that company decisions and the reasons behind them may be explained to employees at all levels. The objective of such a group is to convey understanding of a communication to every employee through face-to-face contact with his supervisor. Each manager is responsible for communication to the people he supervises. To avoid distortion of the most important information, a written brief is frequently issued as a support. Briefings occur once a month and last from 15 minutes to half an hour. Groups vary from 6 to 20 in most of the nine companies. (CK)

The Industrial Society

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SYSTEMATIC COMMUNICATION
BY BRIEFING GROUPS

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C O N T E N T S

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
BRIEFING GROUPS	2
COMPANY EXAMPLES	4
SUMMARY	23
ESTABLISHING A BRIEFING SYSTEM	24
INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY SERVICES	26

INTRODUCTION

Companies of all sizes throughout British industry are becoming more concerned with their communications structures and with the problems of improving those structures. As managers come to realise that their employees cannot be committed to the objectives of an organisation without knowing why they are doing their jobs, the necessity of explaining the role they play in the organisation increases in importance. This survey summarises the experience of nine out of a growing number of companies which have introduced effective face-to-face communication by using a system of briefing groups. Some of these companies were helped by the Industrial Society to develop their briefing system, others developed it independently.

The survey is not directly concerned with upward communication and consultation which need to be dealt with separately.

May 1970

Geoff Blanford

BRIEFING GROUPS

Definition

A briefing group is a group which is called together regularly and consistently in order that decisions, policies and the reasons for them, both at company and departmental levels, may be explained to people. Those briefed communicate in turn to their own briefing group so that information is systematically passed down the management line in a number of interlocking steps. For example,

Director/senior manager H.O.D.S. Supervisors Employees

Objective

To convey understanding of a communication to every employee through face to-face contact with his supervisor.

Benefits

The chief benefits to be attained from using briefing groups may be stated as follows:-

1. Because briefing is face to face communication, it allows questions to be asked and discussions to take place, and therefore better understanding to be achieved.
2. It is a means of rapid downward communication which not only takes less management time than any other method of face-to-face communication, but gives better coverage. It gives managers a channel of communication direct to their employees.
3. The supervisor is the first to know of decisions which have been taken and changes to be made instead of being by-passed by the union representative.
4. Full explanation to employees of policies and changes helps to win commitment to the organisation and this leads to higher productivity.
5. Trade union and employee representatives are able to play their proper role in the organisation structure; that of upward communication on subjects affecting employees, and downward communication of union views, rather than the presentation of management's point of view.
6. The reasons for a decision or change will be clearly understood to be those of management and not the view of trade union or grapevine.
7. Briefing overcomes barriers to communication, such as distortion through several levels and keeping back information.
8. The questions asked give feed back, frequently show unforeseen problems and enable management to receive suggestions.
9. Briefing motivates people as a group and encourages involvement at all levels in an organisation.

These benefits can only be achieved if:

- a) managers are not only committed to briefing, but are seen to be committed;
- b) all those who actually run a briefing group are adequately trained in communicating in this way and
- c) the system is operated on a continuing basis.

It will not operate itself, it must be activated by managers...

EXAMPLE 1

This Company is a paper manufacturer producing high-quality and coated papers. It has several relatively small works spread over the United Kingdom. These consist of 12 paper mills, 16 factories, and 17 sales offices. The Company has a total of 25,000 employees, 1,500 of whom are at the unit described in this example.

1) Responsibility for Communication

Each mill, within group policy limitations, is responsible for its own communications. This flexibility is extended to departments within mills, within the structure of mill rules. Thus, in departments where it is simple to stop the job, this is done, while in departments which cannot be stopped, briefing takes place when the machines are running smoothly. All Managers therefore are responsible for their own communications.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

This example describes one of the mills. Though regular meetings were held before briefing groups were initiated, a need for improved communication was identified. Briefing appeared to fill the need for downward communication and was introduced into this mill in 1968 after a visit by John Garnett, Director of The Industrial Society.

3) Procedure for Briefing

Mill Managers are called to Head Office in London regularly in order to be briefed. Afterwards each returns to his unit and passes on as much of what was briefed as he thinks his Managers require or would like to know.

In this mill, the Manager briefs his Heads of Departments weekly. After this meeting they may or may not call their own groups together as they see fit. The Heads of Departments' briefing groups include Supervisors and Foremen; Foremen's groups cover all the men in their shift unless there are more than 25, in which case charge-hand groups are formed.

Briefing also takes place within specialities. Personnel Managers or Managers of Technical Departments are occasionally called to London or, at mill level, the General Manager briefs a certain grade on matters affecting only them.

4) Frequency and Duration

The Head Office briefings for Mill and Divisional Managers are monthly, while specialist briefings are held once every three months.

Within the mill, Heads of Departments are briefed weekly and most men are briefed twice in every three weeks. The grade meetings at mill level of foremen, work study or technical people occur about twice a year.

Group policy states that there should be four briefings per year but the mill demands that a minimum of six should be held. If only the minimum figures are used the meetings are regular, but if they are to be more frequent they are held as is necessary.

London briefings have no time limit and last as long as is required. There is no group policy but the mill gives 10 to 30 or more minutes as required, at shop floor level, and the General Manager's briefing lasts from 45 minutes to 2 hours or more, depending on the complexity and number of subjects.

5) Special Problems

A three shift system is worked by this Company with the shift changing weekly. The night shift Foreman is briefed by the Foreman on the previous shift unless there is something urgent to be communicated, in which case the night shift Foreman is called in during the day, or a Manager stays late.

Foremen are trained in communications when it is found to be necessary. All foremen are trained as supervisors.

6) Opinion

The men appreciated being informed about the Company and thought that they were now told much more than before the system was introduced.

7) Group Size

There are 15 - 20 people in a briefing group.

8) Successful Brief

When the Government introduced its earnings related sickness benefit scheme, the Company's own scheme was discontinued as it was no longer economically viable. This was not a popular decision, but was carefully explained through briefing groups. Suggestions for alternative schemes were asked for and received. Little trouble was encountered as a result of the explaining that was done.

EXAMPLE 2

This is a small Company which services Architects' offices with information on manufacturers' products. There are 102 employees, most of whom are spread over Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Each of the field staff has a car in which to travel from office to office.

1) Responsibility for Communication

In a Company of this size the Manager can usually see each employee personally. The dispersion of employees makes this extremely difficult so it is necessary to have all Supervisors responsible for communicating to their groups.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

The Company started briefing about eight years ago. Subsequently The Industrial Society had an influence on the size of the groups which are briefed, which has now been reduced to about ten. The reason for starting was to give the field staff a broader view of where they fitted into the Company, and how the Company fitted into the industry it serves.

3) Procedure for Briefing

There is a field staff of 75, 60 of whom are Service Girls and 15 of whom are Salesmen. Each group of 5 to 7 people have a field manager. They are all brought to London on the last Friday of each month. They usually arrive on Thursday evening and they meet their managers and colleagues over drinks for informal discussions.

At 9 o'clock the next morning the whole of the Company meets either to watch a film or to hear a talk on a subject which is of interest not necessarily directly connected with the business. This lasts for approximately 1 hour.

This is followed by the Round Robin which lasts approximately 35 minutes. The Round Robin is the true briefing and during it the department managers circulate to the groups of people explaining the highlights and lowlights of the previous month and projections for the coming month.

Then there is an hour and a half of Refresher Training, which is mostly done on a question and answer basis.

During the afternoon the people meet with their regional managers in small groups. A meeting of this kind also takes place in each region in the middle of the month. This allows any problems to be discussed and any important information to be briefed.

4) Frequency and Duration

Briefings are held monthly both at Head Office and in the field. Thus, each person is briefed at fortnightly intervals.

The Head Office briefing lasts for a full day, with each section of the briefing taking about one hour. Regional briefings are much shorter and only take as long as is necessary.

5) Special Problems

The geographical distribution of employees makes communication very difficult, especially as they are all mobile. The tendency for the individual to become detached from the objectives of the Company is overcome very well.

6) Opinion

Most people thought that briefing was very useful and the trip to London was appreciated as they were able to meet each other. Some disliked the Round Robin and would have preferred to move from department to department to actually see what was being done. This was apparently once done.

7) Group Size

There are from 4 - 7 people in each group.

8) Successful Brief

There have been no outstandingly successful briefs. As all changes are briefed it is difficult to say what the effect would have been if they were not. Even the reasons behind dismissals are briefed.

EXAMPLE 3

This Company is a printer by lithography and letterpress, owning two well-known presses. There are two works and the Company has a total of 700 employees, 230 of whom are at the works described in this example.

1) Responsibility for Communication

Each Works is responsible for its own communications and any communication direct from Head Office to employees is avoided because the units do not want their workers looking to the Head Office man as the boss.

Within the Works each Manager is responsible for communication within his department.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

Briefing was started in 1965 when the Works moved its site and doubled its staff. The idea of briefing groups came from an Industrial Society course. It was realised that to carry out so much change, without staffing problems or strikes, would require a sophisticated communications' system. Much training was to be done and briefing helped with this. Most employees had grown up with the Firm so changes needed to be especially well explained to them.

3) Procedure for Briefing

The Works Director briefs his Managers who then brief their Overseers. The Overseers brief the operators.

There are nine Managers, so groups tend to be fairly small. Anyone with Supervisory authority may initiate a briefing and the result of this is more frequent briefings than would otherwise take place.

Fathers of Chapel are briefed with the men on matters outside the Union sphere, and before the men on matters within the Union sphere. In the latter case, the FOCs are given time to return to their groups before the men are briefed. This helps ensure that the same information is given to everyone.

Briefing takes place in a quiet area close to the shop floor, but not usually on it, and widely dispersed groups such as oilers, fitters, and cleaners are brought together monthly for briefing.

4) Frequency and Duration

When briefing was started there were two briefings every three months, but it was found that there was sometimes nothing to brief and a subject had to be produced. On these occasions it was found that briefing fell flat, so now there are only briefings when natural subjects arise. As anyone with Supervisory authority may call his group together, most men are briefed once every six weeks on average.

There is usually no set time for briefing, nor is there a predetermined duration. A subject must be briefed "before the end of the week" or "within two days". The length of time which is taken to brief is fairly short but is allowed to be extended if necessary. On important occasions times are set.

In the future, accounts information may be briefed. This would cause briefing groups to be called more frequently.

5) Special Problems

Shifts overlap by 15 minutes in the afternoon so it is difficult to brief news to the second shift. The grapevine tends to work first.

6) Opinion

Briefing groups were thought to be very useful and there were few criticisms. Many thought that information on orders would be useful so that longer notice of overtime could be given.

7) Group Size

There are 15 - 25 people in a briefing group.

3) Successful Brief

The Management decided to brief its attitude to the recognised Trade Unions (NGA, SOGAT, SLADE, AEF). They said that employees should not only belong to a Trade Union but should be active within their Union by attending Branch meetings and becoming Union officials. The result was much improved relations with Trade Unions.

EXAMPLE 4

This Company is a large retailer with 12 Divisions throughout the United Kingdom. There are about 20 stores in each Division. The Company has 32,000 employees, 300 of whom are at the store described in this example.

1) Responsibility for Communication

Stores have always been responsible for training their own staff. Head Office introduced training sessions to improve training uniformly. Due to the type of business, the training includes much information, which is suitable for briefing and it is disseminated through small groups. Head Office is the initiator of most subjects which are briefed.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

In 1965, although stores were closely controlled by Head Office, the accent on productivity made off-the-job training and communication difficult to arrange. At the same time, as the business grew, it became increasingly difficult to rely on personal communication of information. The Company therefore developed a pattern of systematic communications based on continuous training.

3) Procedure for Briefing

Managers are briefed at Head Office, at the Divisional Office, or at the store by visiting Divisional staff. These Managers then brief Supervisors, who brief the sales staff. The Staff Manageress arranges the training within each store.

Subjects for briefing often arrive by letter but may be added to as a result of visits to Divisional Offices, or by the visits of Divisional Officers. As these Officers are frequently at Head Office they inform branches of many new decisions, policies or instructions.

Managers or specialist staff often visit the Divisional Office or they may be called there at the Superintendent's discretion. All of this gives a fairly thorough channel of communication to and from Head Office.

4) Frequency and Duration

All stores open half an hour later than the usual time once a week. During the half hour the training session takes place.

Managers are briefed in London twice a year usually before the seasonal merchandise changes. Divisional meetings take place about three times each year. These meetings have no fixed time limit.

5) Special Problems

The major problem is dispersion with a high degree of centralised management. This is overcome by the continual movement of Divisional staff between Head Office and the stores.

6) Opinion

Staff thought that communications were extremely good and that most questions were answered before they were asked. Some older staff disliked having training material continuously repeated. No-one could think of anything more that they would have liked to know.

7) Group Size

There are usually 5 - 15 girls in each group.

8) Success of Briefing System

No notable successes of individual briefings were mentioned but this was hardly surprising as the company has always been good in the field of communications.

The success of the system is however reflected in the increased number of effective 'trainers', particularly at supervisory level, and in the high quality of service by the sales staff.

EXAMPLE 5

This Company is a large manufacturer of motor vehicles, parts, marine and industrial engines, and industrial gas turbines. It is organised in divisions. There are 188,000 employees in the group, 4,700 of whom are employed at the division described in this example.

1) Responsibility for Communication

Each Manager is responsible for his own communication, although he works within a well-planned network, drawn up by the Organisation & Methods Department.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

The Company for sometime had recognised the need to improve communication and combat the grapevine, but have not found an effective way of doing this. In 1965 with the help of the Industrial Society, briefing groups were introduced in order to ensure information was transmitted quickly and accurately and everyone understood what had been briefed.

3) Procedure for Briefing

This Company does not brief its operators on the shop floor, but does brief their direct superiors. The Company has looked at its structure very carefully and designed a very thorough briefing organisation. This design could be extended to cover every employee in the Division.

The Divisional Director has a group containing all the top Managers. Each Manager has his own group and the people who attend these groups are specified in Communication Handbook, as is the next level. Managers are free to include more people in their groups if they so wish.

For the Divisional Director's meetings, briefing notes are always prepared. Any senior member of a group may have notes reproduced at one hour's notice for distribution at a briefing meeting.

4) Frequency and Duration

The handbook suggests that a briefing should take place every two weeks. This is, in fact, not adhered to, and most people are briefed once every three to four weeks. Any Manager may brief any other group or groups, and any senior member of a group may call that group together. The result is that Managers do call their own groups together, usually about once each month. The rest of the briefings emanate from the Divisional Director who only briefs when there is something of importance to be briefed.

No time limit is placed on briefings. They may take as long as is necessary. The time is usually less than half an hour, but this was found to be very variable between Managers.

5) Special Problems

Shop Stewards are briefed simultaneously to Foremen, but separately. Managers may write a brief to overcome shift problems. Some use the Foremen of the previous shift to pass on the briefing, and others come in and brief the nightshift Foremen themselves.

6) Opinion

Several Supervisors thought that the Company's system of communicating had greatly improved since 1965 and that they were better informed about their Company than people in similar positions in other companies.

7) Group Size

The groups are kept small, varying from about three to fifteen.

8) Successful Brief

A major merger was successfully briefed so that the employees knew of it before the Press. This apparently reduced anxiety and eased the problems raised by associated changes.

EXAMPLE 6

This Company manufactures and distributes tobacco, cigarettes, cigars and snuff. There are factories and warehouses throughout the U.K., Eire and Rhodesia. There are 15,095 employees in the group, 1,380 of whom are at the unit described in this example.

1) Responsibility for Communication

Managers are responsible for communication within their own Departments, subject to the Administration Manager who designed the structure for briefing. Head Office does not practice briefing and this part of the Organisation has set up its own briefing structure.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

Both Unions and Management recognised a need for improved communications. As a result, briefing groups were introduced by the Company. Subsequently, the arrangements for briefing were modified after discussion with the Industrial Society.

3) Procedure for Briefing

The Factory Manager briefs Department Heads, who then brief Supervisors (both office and Foremen). Employees are briefed by their Supervisors.

A written brief is provided for each briefing. These briefs are usually aimed at a particular level and this is stated on the brief itself. Some topics may be of importance only to Foremen, for instance. Office Supervisors would not be briefed on this.

4) Frequency and Duration

Briefing groups are called together irregularly, averaging once in six weeks. They last for 10-15 minutes unless longer is required, in which case as much time as is necessary is allowed.

5) Special Problems

The Company found that its organisation was unsuitable for briefing, so it physically reorganised itself within its building, so that those who would attend a group were situated close to each other.

Some distortion was found as information came through some groups and some Supervisors were found not to have briefed.

A particular problem was that, although Union Officials were saying that the Company needed to communicate with its employees more effectively, the Shop Stewards resented briefing groups and processed official complaints and grievances about this. The Company persevered with briefing and the Shop Stewards have now accepted it. Nothing controversial has yet been briefed and trouble is expected should a subject of a controversial nature be used.

6) Opinion

Employees were enthusiastic about briefing and would have liked a broader range of subjects to be briefed. They did not know that their Shop Stewards had any objections to briefing. Supervisors thought that the written brief which went with each briefing was very useful when carrying out their own brief, as it aided accuracy.

7) Group Size

The size of work groups varies from 6 to 40; in the latter case the group is divided in two for briefing. The average group size is less than 20.

8) Successful Brief

There have been no outstanding successes due to the limited subjects which can be briefed. Christmas holiday arrangements have been much simplified due to careful explanation through briefing, and successful gift schemes have been launched with the help of briefing.

EXAMPLE 7

This Company is a large brewing group, with 9 breweries, 8,000 licenced properties, as well as subsidiary brewers, wine and spirit merchants and distributors of soft drinks. There are 11,000 employees (and a further 10,000 in pubs), 3,000 of whom are at the unit described in this example.

1) Responsibility for Communication

Every link in the management chain is responsible for communicating above, below, and sideways within the organisation. Each manager is also responsible for sifting information or adding to it if he wishes. Most formal briefing is at present initiated by the Board and more was found to be sifted than added as the briefing was passed through the organisation.

The Company has a very good permanent instruction on communication, much of which is about downward communication by briefing groups.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

Briefing groups were introduced by the Board at a time of re-organisation and expansion in order to strengthen and underline the extended chain of command by more systematic communication. The aim is to pass on decisions for action, together with the reasons for them, and to keep everyone as fully informed as possible of the Company's policies and activities. The opportunity for questions and answers at a verbal briefing is considered essential to ensure understanding, which is so often lacking when information is written.

Briefing groups are also used for upward communication among the staff, since there is no representative system available in the Company for members of the staff other than direct personal access to a Director arranged through an individual's Head of Department. The aim of this use of briefing groups is to ensure that communication runs through the line of management and that managers are not by-passed.

3) Procedure for Briefing

After a Board Meeting Directors brief senior managers or else a briefing letter may be sent to every senior manager stating in detail what should be briefed. For example, the Production Director briefs his Heads of Department, who see their deputies and section heads together, and they, in their turn, see their groups of supervisors, or foremen and charge hands. Each supervisor, foreman and charge-hand then acts as management's spokesman to a group of employees.

Shop stewards are briefed at the same time as foremen but separately.

Originators are responsible for defining the level to which information should go, and for stating this in a written 'Management Brief' which accompanies the briefing.

This procedure is not applied so formally at lower levels and the managers have discretion in what they brief, except in specified cases. Communications originating within a department are transmitted in the manner that the originator wishes. This usually means that a subject suitable for briefing is communicated in writing or through workers' representatives.

An arrangement has recently been introduced to ensure that briefing and consultation of staff takes place on a regular and consistent basis. Managers responsible for briefing are required to complete a short Staff Briefing Report on a standard form. This covers:

1. Matters raised by staff for which an answer is required from the next line of management.
2. Matters raised by staff for which answers have been given.
3. Record of other subjects briefed.
4. Record of subjects on which consultation has taken place.

Copies are passed to the manager's boss, and Heads of Department are expected to summarise in their report all significant items in the reports of their subordinates.

4) Frequency and Duration

Briefing groups are called together at irregular intervals. This may be as frequent as weekly, but managers are required to hold not less than two briefings in a quarter. There is no stated length of time for briefing and wide variation was found between departments.

5) Special Problems

This is a Company with an extremely complex organisation. There is more than one Board, so Directors from the Main Board may be found communicating to other Boards. This increases the number of levels through which briefing must take place.

There is a large transport organisation which is difficult to brief as the drivers are not normally there in groups of any size. As far as possible, however, transport foremen do brief transport crews in groups of a dozen or more. Failing this, a notice is posted which all must read when they come in, and a man is present of whom questions may be asked; or else a briefing note is passed around the department for signatures instead of verbal briefing.

6) Opinion

The management were a little disappointed with the results of briefing because, although communications were found to be better, they were not dramatically improved.

The men thought it was much improved in those departments which were briefing well but could see little value in it where it was not being practised. They still thought that the idea was good.

7) Group Size

The average group size is about 18, and, with the exception of the Transport Department, never more than 20 people.

8) Successful Brief

A successful brief was carried out on the subject of wage parity for the same work between males and females. Since briefing groups for staff are also used as an opportunity for staff to raise any question concerning their conditions of service or their work, the issue of wage parity was raised. An answer followed very shortly and action was taken within three weeks. This took the heat out of a potentially controversial situation.

EXAMPLE 8

This Company is a parent of 30 subsidiaries in shipowning, agents, brokers, ships suppliers, stevedores and engineers. The Company has 8,617 employees, most of whom are in ships at sea.

1) Responsibility for Communication

The responsibility for communication may be divided into two distinct areas, those of shore and shipboard. Ashore, Company Managers and Heads of Departments are responsible for communication, while at sea, Captains are entirely responsible. Between the two areas, ships may be contacted by letter, signal or telephone when in port. Some of this is done by Managers and some is done specifically by the various Departments concerned.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

Two types of briefing are operated. Briefing groups are held aboard ships and discussion groups are held for senior officers ashore.

The Company believes that people work better and are more satisfied with life if they know about and understand things which affect the Company or affect them personally.

3) Procedure for Briefing

This is done regularly on board ships through the usual chain of command. Ships tend to have structures which already encourage a form of briefing but the Company has extended this and recognised that it can be detailed and described. Each ship, therefore, has a written structure for briefing which starts with the Captain, or the Staff Captain in his absence. The Captain briefs Heads of Departments, who in turn brief their subordinates. The maximum number of briefings in the examples given is four, but three levels including the Captain's briefing group is more usual.

To prevent briefing material being garbled, a written note usually accompanies any subject which is to be communicated to all ratings.

The Senior Officers are briefed at discussion sessions in London every two years on average. The Company would like to cover all of them more frequently but due to voyage schedules it is extremely difficult to have enough officers in port at the same time to be worth expending the amount of senior Management's time that is usually given to these occasions.

The Officers are given a full day of lectures and discussions, mostly the latter, away from both ships and offices. This encourages both upward and downward communications to take place. Questions on any subject may be asked.

4) Frequency and Duration

The Senior Officers' discussion groups, which are residential, take place three times annually but as only about one sixth of the Officers can attend each meeting, each Officer attends once every two years. Each meeting lasts 2½ hours and is residential.

Shipboard briefings are more frequent. Captain's briefings take place daily, but these are mostly for the discussion of problems for the day to day running of the ship. Officers are encouraged to give reasons with orders. Frequency and duration among these groups vary from group to group and ship to ship. For this reason no estimates could be made.

5) Special Problems

The fact that ships are infrequently in a port where the officers may be briefed, makes good communications difficult. Discussion groups partly overcome this but the problem still exists.

The 'galley wireless' is very efficient in such a closely knit community, so the briefing organisation must be equally efficient.

6) Opinion

Senior Officers, in answering a questionnaire, generally expressed the view that discussion groups were extremely useful. It was not possible to find out opinions on board ships.

7) Group Size

Neither the Senior Officers' groups nor the shipboard briefing groups usually exceed 20 members.

8) Successful Brief

No outstandingly successful briefings were mentioned, possibly because it is difficult to evaluate the results especially at shipboard level.

EXAMPLE 9

This Company is a manufacturer of biscuits and cakes. It has six factories and depots in all major towns. The Company has 23,000 employees, 2,200 of whom are at the unit described in this example.

1) Responsibility for Communication

Each Manager is responsible for communicating within his own Department.

2) Reasons for Introducing Briefing Groups

The Company has a high proportion of immigrant labour which has made written communication less easy to use, especially if understanding is required. Even before this time the Company had been moving towards improving its communication with employees.

3) Procedure for Briefing

The Factory Directors are briefed by Head Office. They brief their Heads of Departments who, in turn, brief Shift Managers among the men, and Forewomen among the women. Shift Managers brief Foremen, and Forewomen brief charge-hands or operators depending on the size of the group.

All the briefings are backed by a written brief down to Supervisor level and may be followed by a notice.

4) Frequency and Duration

Briefings take place irregularly, averaging once every six weeks. They usually last for between 15 and 30 minutes but longer is allowed if necessary.

5) Special Problems

The differing abilities of Supervisors to communicate was very noticeable in this Company. Some groups were being briefed extremely well while others had never been briefed at all. In general the briefing was very well done except as concerns shifts. The Shift Manager briefs the next Shift Manager. This tends to leave the night shift badly covered as extra levels of briefing take place before they receive the briefing.

The amount of immigrant labour causes a language problem among some groups. It is required that all employees have a good working knowledge of English but care must still be taken.

6) Opinion

Briefing was felt to be very useful by all but those who were not being briefed. They felt that it was a good idea which should be tried in their sections as well.

Some people wanted the subject matter to be widened, especially as concerns departmental information.

7) Group Size

Among the men, the group size varies from about five to thirty. In this latter case charge hands are sometimes used. Women's groups are usually smaller, containing between ten and fifteen only.

8) Successful Brief

The theory behind agreements with the Trade Unions has been successfully briefed as also was the introduction of a closed shop. This probably saved much trouble with those who wished to remain non union.

SUMMARY

The following points summarise the arrangements for briefing in the nine companies described:

1) Responsibility

Each manager or foreman is responsible for communication to the people he supervises.

2) Reasons

With the rapid growth of a company its communications must be improved and systematised.

3) Procedure

The most common procedure is for the General Manager to brief Heads of Departments, who brief foremen or supervisors. The foremen and supervisors then brief the operatives and the office staff. To avoid distortion of the most important information a written brief is frequently issued as a support to the verbal explanation.

4) Frequency and Duration

Briefings occur once a month. They last from 15 minutes to half an hour, or longer if necessary.

5) When to Brief

The time for briefing depends on the type of industry and the pattern of work. Daywork: As people start work or before tea breaks or lunch. Shiftwork: At the start of a shift. This may mean holding the outgoing shift on overtime and briefing the incoming shift. Night Shift: The senior foreman of the afternoon shift may brief the senior foreman of the night shift. Alternatively, the night foreman may be called in during the day for briefing or a manager may come in at night in order to brief the foreman.

If it is impossible to stop production briefing may be carried out near the machines while they are running or in small groups, leaving enough men to maintain production.

6) Opinion

The great majority of employees were greatly in favour of briefing but some managements were a little disappointed in it. One company believes that if employees think that briefing is of little help, they are either being poorly briefed or they are being briefed the wrong information.

7) Size

Groups vary from 6 to 20 in most companies. In larger or smaller groups, few questions are asked.

ESTABLISHING A BRIEFING SYSTEM

The Industrial Society has in recent years had considerable experience of assisting organisations to set up briefing groups. The evidence is that it is surprisingly difficult to establish an adequate and reliable communication system throughout an organisation unless management treat this as a thoroughgoing exercise.

Gaining management commitment

The General Manager of an organisation employing about 5,000 people returned from an Industrial Society course and instructed his managers in a written brief to set up a briefing group system. This was ineffective. The solution adopted was to get managers and supervisors together for a day to bring out the way in which communication affects efficiency and to explain the briefing group system to them face to face.

With this experience in mind, The Industrial Society has developed an effective programme for a one day conference in which every manager and supervisor in the organisation can participate. The aim is to explain and discuss briefing groups in a practical way and to gain the co-operation and commitment of the whole management team for communication by this means.

Ensuring systematic arrangements

Experience of such one day conferences shows that most managers and supervisors readily agree that this would be an effective way of improving communication. But this is not sufficient to ensure that communication does in fact take place reliably and consistently. There must be a clear system. Although there is room for flexibility and variations between different departments and groups, the essential requirements seem to be:

- 1) a defined briefing structure which indicates who is responsible for briefing which people at each level.
- 2) a drill setting out how often normal briefing must take place. A realistic standard is once a month down to supervisors and at least once a quarter to all employees.
- 3) either a written brief or a requirement that those being briefed should take careful notes of the information they are to pass on.
- 4) a periodic check to confirm that information is being effectively passed down the line so that understanding is achieved.

Practice for first line managers

An effective briefing system requires managers and supervisors to play an active part in communication. Two difficulties experienced are that they may lack the confidence to brief their workgroup or they assume that the only information to be briefed comes from senior management.

It is useful to provide training for a day or even half a day which helps them develop their ability by actual practice at briefing in small groups. The training can also be used to identify more clearly the matters in their own area of responsibility which people need to understand if they are to achieve high performance.

Getting started

Some planning will be needed for the start of the new system. In particular where employees are in unions it is important that union representatives should understand that this form of communication is not intended to undermine their proper role. A useful starting point may be safety or training talks, followed by subjects like costs and future plans. It should then be possible to tackle more contentious subjects, and finally, with agreement and with the shop steward playing his part, joint management-union matters.

INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY SERVICES

The following services are available for member companies who want to improve downward communication:

Information material

The Society's information department has examples of company practice covering communication policies, briefing group structures, written briefs, newsletters, magazines, noticeboards, and employee handbooks.

Advisory service

Specialist staff are available to advise on a company's communication arrangements or to carry out an investigation and make recommendations.

Establishing a briefing group system

A specialist adviser will lead a one day conference in a company on improving communication by means of briefing groups. Other aspects of communication can also be covered.

Courses and conferences

Regular one and two day courses are held in London and regional centres:

- for directors and senior managers on organising an effective communication system.
- for middle managers and senior supervisors on carrying out communication in practice.
- on effective speaking for managers.

In-company courses on communication can be arranged for all levels of management to meet the particular needs of a company.

Publications

The Manager's Responsibility for Communication (7/3d.)
Improving Industrial Communication (50/-d. members,
65/-d. non-members)

Filmstrips

5-10 minute sound filmstrips available for sale or hire include:

Briefing groups.
Briefing groups in the office.
Communicating with scattered units.
Can you give an order?
How do you communicate?